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ABSTRACT

The high school football coach at Parkrose Senior High School explains his involvement as one of two teachers of a Contemporary Family Life course as an attempt to give students an opportunity to develop an understanding of the problems generated by marriage. One of several elective mini-courses offered to all seniors who have completed a required general economics course in the Modern Problems Curriculum, popularity of Contemporary Family Life has steadily risen in the two years it has been offered. Students first appraise their social and psychological readiness for marriage by taking a series of tests. They then pair off and go through a simulated marriage ceremony. During the rest of the course, the "married couples" complete a series of assignments that involve problems concerned with job hunting, housing, budgeting, food buying, car payments, insurance, family planning, and divorce. Students are assigned textbook reading in addition to being provided with a bibliography and a school library reading list, but community resource people provide the basis of the classroom learning process. All assignments are detailed in a course-required notebook, kept by and graded for each couple jointly. (Author/KSM)

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An Exercise In Realism: Contemporary Family Life

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When a high school football coach in a metropolitan school district thinks that teaching a senior course in contemporary family life is "the most exciting thing that's happened to me in education," the course deserves examination and possible adoption by other school systems.

The expressed enthusiasm comes from Clifford G. Allen, teacher at Parkrose Senior High School in Portland, Oregon. Allen and a colleague, Wesley Johnson, have put together an elective course that gives senior boys and girls a real look into what marriage and the family is all about--and helps them to realize that it's a lot more than sexual compatibility.

"We don't teach sex education. The home economics department does a better job with that. What we try to give the kids is an opportunity to develop an understanding of the practical problems two people face when they consider marriage and building a life together. We don't teach a certain life style, either. Our students can discuss anything. People push standards onto kids, and the kids don't want it. They want facts against which they can build their own lives."

The above constitutes an informal statement of the philosophy around which Johnson and Allen teach the course. Johnson is a 16-year staffer at Parkrose who has been a teacher for 26 years. Allen has been with the district the past four years, having taught at Elmira, Roseburg, and Bend, Oregon, prior to going to Portland. Allen is Parkrose football coach; Johnson coaches track. Both have taught history courses.

Contemporary Family Life is a nine-week sequence in Parkrose Senior High School's curriculum in Modern Problems. All senior students are required to enroll in a sequence in general economics prior to "branching out" into a variety of elective mini-courses, all under the umbrella of the social sciences. Contemporary Family Life is one of those electives. Others include Liberty and Law, Prejudices, Human Ecology, Sociology, Anthropology, and International Relations.

Indication that Contemporary Family Life, introduced two years ago, is one of the more popular of the electives is shown by the increase from the original five sections offered the first term to 10 sections of about 25 students each, plus a night course. The latter enrolls about 30 students who have dropped out of the regular high school schedule, but want to take the course. Each of the 10 sections meets five times a week for a 54-minute class period. The nine-week segment consists of 24 units of instruction. Allen and Johnson estimate that during the school year approximately 60 percent of the seniors take the course.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

A formal statement of objectives included in a printed course guide indicates the innovative approach the two social science teachers have developed:

> The major objective is to help the student understand the responsibilities that marriage generates. This is done by having the student go through the actual experience of handling the problems of marriage. Each student will have to work with another student in a situation that will require them to solve problems of money management, divorce, home buying, insurance, occupation, and child care....

Some major ideas listed in the course outline include:

- Understanding one's personality is one of the most important aspects of maturity.
- Good marriages are a result of a person's having the opportunity of dating people and finding out what type of person will make a compatible partner.

- The family is the cornerstone of American society.

- We learn by doing.

- One of the major problems of marriage today is the inability of couples to handle money.

- The leading cause of divorce is the inability of people to handle finances.

- The home (house) is the largest investment the average family makes.

- Every society has ways of terminating unwanted legal agreements.

An additional introductory paragraph in the guide further emphasizes the purposes of the course:

> ...to give the student an understanding of some of the problems that American families are facing today. The class is student-centered and as realistic as possible. No attempt is made in this class to sell a life style, but rather to look at the problems as we see them. A great deal of time is spent on money management and personal attitudes toward marriage and family life.

The exposure to "realism" comes early in the course. In an introductory period, students examine and discuss engagement attitudes, take tests of social and psychological readiness for marriage, and respond to the question: "Is this person (the individual student) mature enough to manage the real responsibilities of marriage?"

Students then pair off and go through a simulated marriage ceremony, complete with an exchange of vows, rings, and a certificate. During the rest of the course, the "married couples" complete a series of assignments that involve typical problems concerned with job hunting, housing, budgeting, food buying, car payments, insurance, and family planning. As a final exercise, the costs, property settlement, and child custody aspects of divorce are examined.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

The pre-marriage portion of the course includes considerable discussion on engagement attitudes; an exchange of ideas on desirable length of engagement, types of rings, respective ages, and possible adjustments to age differences; general future plans; consideration of each other's career expectations; economic adjustments; religious attitudes and adjustments; children; role positions; and types of wedding ceremonies.

As background for the above discussions, the students are assigned portions of two textbooks: Paul H. Landis, *Your Marriage and Family Living*, 3rd edition (McGraw-Hill, 1969); and Judson T. Landis and Mary G. Landis, *Personal Adjustment: Marriage and Family Living*, 5th edition (Prentice-Hall, 1970). There are also reading and discussion assignments out of Roman F. Warmke, *Consumer Economic Problems*, 8th edition (South-Western Publishing Co., 1971). The course is not designed around the traditional textbook assignment format, but Allen and Johnson consider the above texts more or less "officially" part of the course. The printed guide includes a 14-book bibliography, which includes the three above texts. The students are given an extensive school library reading list which includes many of the standard references and eight works of fiction concerned with marriage and the family.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Community resource people are brought into the classroom for discussions on childbirth, adoption, birth control, the legal aspects of unwed motherhood, divorce, home purchase, credit, insurance, and taxes. Free and open discussion generally follows the presentations, and the teachers feel this does more to provide a base for the learning process than the routine textbook assignment. Films are presented on such topics as dating, childbirth, and early marriage. These are secured from the Oregon State Board of Health. Both teachers feel that most films covering the areas in which they teach lack impact as an instructional tool. "Most of them are outdated, badly put together, and the kids don't really relate to them," is their criticism.

PRACTICING MARRIAGE

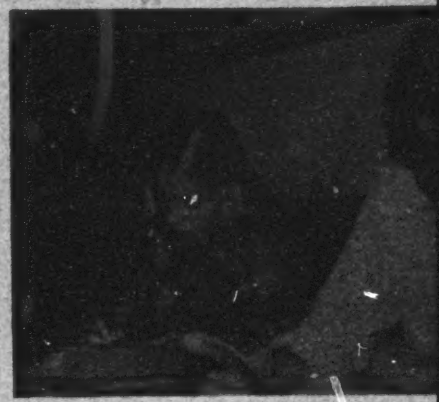
After the personality assessment and engagement portions of the course are completed, the students pick their own "marriage partner."

"We simply leave the class alone for a few minutes and generally when we come back into the room the students have made their choices. It's no big deal." Usually about 12 couples make up one class section.

To further the atmosphere of realism, a "marriage ceremony" is performed in which the student partners pledge to work with and guide each other in the "...execution of all problems presented in this marriage exercise for the better or worse whichever that grade may be...." A prototype marriage certificate is

Wesley Johnson performs mock marriage ceremony.

Students plan a budget for their first year of "marriage."



Finding appropriate housing presents a serious p
this couple.

Students exchange rings to "seal" their marriage agreement.

A couple works together on a budget which includes food, household needs, rent, clothing, and entertainment.

for

filled out and signed by the instructor, and, in some of the ceremonies, rings are used.

The "honeymoon" is over immediately after the ceremony, and the students get to work on the first three of a series of assignments: The boy must find a job that a high school dropout could get; both boy and girl must obtain the cost of an apartment located near the high school; they must find out the total cost of having a child.

Progress and completion of these assignments, plus others subsequently given, are detailed in a course-required notebook. This is the major project of the course, and both students are graded equally upon their combined notebook. The teachers feel this emphasizes the idea of a marriage being a team experience for individuals working together.

There is much emphasis upon budgeting. The students learn early that any gross salary they might earn is pared about 30% when state and federal income taxes and social security deductions are made. Monthly and first-year budgets are figured and then are projected for yearly budgets at 5- and 10-year periods in the marriage. In the budgeting sessions the students are aided by information from a local bank that gives suggested percentages to allocate to each of 12 expenditure categories: savings, 5%; shelter, 25%; food, 25%; household, 8%; life insurance, 4%; car maintenance, 4%; car insurance, 3%; entertainment, 3%; miscellaneous, 4%.

The couples go house or apartment hunting through the classified sections of Portland newspapers and contact real estate people in their search for housing. Car purchase and financing is handled in a similar manner, the couples seeking out the deal that best suits their budgeted fiscal picture.

Likewise, the students are required to complete a food buying schedule for a month, after working out a dietary plan for a balanced weekly menu. For this part of the course, the students are expected to go to several grocery stores in the neighborhood and do comparison off-the-shelf shopping. Grades are determined by how well the diet is balanced and how close to their budget each couple stays.

FAMILY CRISES

Like the adage says--true love (or marriage) never does run smooth--and at Parkrose, Contemporary Family Life has its rough spots, too. Johnson has developed a series of family crisis problems that he has incorporated into the course through a "wheel of fortune" device.

The wheel, similar to that found at almost any game of chance concession, has six bracketed sections, labeled A, B, C, D, E, and F. Each couple gets three spins at the wheel. An "F" stop on any of the spins tells the couple they "luck out"--no crisis. A stop of the wheel at any of the other sections and a specified problem arises.

On the first spin the simulated problem involves the family car. Repair jobs are indicated, and the costs range from $95 to $250. The couple must refigure their budget to cover the unanticipated cost.

The second wheel spin involves a general family problem, which may be pregnancy, an uninsured fire, sickness which costs more than medical coverage pays, in-laws in need of financial help, or a job layoff. Each of the problems means that the couple must reshuffle their assets to bring about a solution.

The third spin of the wheel involves rebudgeting for property tax increases, special assessments, or special tax levies which have been approved in their hypothetical communities. In some of these simulated situations the couple must budget their payments over a year; in others the time involved is 10 or 15 years.

At the beginning of the course each couple is allotted a savings account of $500, to which they may add as they set up and establish a budget. The savings account may be used in any manner the couple chooses, and it is part of the course to decide how and in which instances an "emergency" exists and whether or not it warrants use of savings. Development of a family insurance program also is part of the project.

GETTING DIVORCED

A final assignment for each couple is to investigate the problems of divorce. They are to find out costs, legal reasons that can be used to secure a divorce, settlement of the distribution of the property which theoretically has been accumulated over a 10-year period of marriage, child custody procedures, alimony, and other facets involved in ending a marriage contract.

The segment on divorce is included in the course, not because the teachers want to give the impression to the students that divorce is the end toward which contemporary family life leads, but to maintain the realism around which the course is offered. Statistics being what they are, a realistic approach demands that the students at least be exposed to the problems of divorce costs, legal aspects, and some of the trauma involved in a marriage breakup--even if on a make-believe basis.

THE FUTURE

Parkrose School District is located at the northeast edge of metropolitan Portland. It is one of the "bedroom" areas of the city, populated mainly by families who go outside the district to earn livelihoods in the many industrial, manufacturing, or service fields within the Portland areas. Families

generally are in the lower to upper-middle income brackets, and there is a racial mix of White, Black, and Oriental among the 26,000 people in the district. The Oriental families stem from a once-flourishing commercial truck farming enterprise in the area, now greatly decreased due to the suburbanization of the area and the resultant use of the land for other purposes. The district supports six elementary schools, two junior high schools, and the senior high school. Student population at Parkrose Senior High School is approximately 1500. About 65 percent of the high school graduates go on to a college experience, either a vocational community college or a four-year degree institution. Enrollment at Mt. Hood Community College in Portland is a popular matriculation for Parkrose graduates.

Whether the Parkrose graduates go on to a vocational college, to a university, or enter the job market, most of them will consider getting married, many of them a year or so after high school graduation. It is the hope of Clifford Allen and Wesley Johnson that when their Contemporary Family Life students approach the marriage stage in their individual lives, they will do so with a more realistic attitude because they were involved, on a partnership basis, with at least a theoretical look at many of the experiences in marriage that need solutions based on facts, not romanticism; that they will have learned how to sidestep some of the roadblocks in the path to married happiness--or at least learned that the roadblocks are apt to be there.

It is this involvement in helping young people visualize such roadblocks and work around them that gets a high school football coach excited about teaching Contemporary Family Life at Parkrose Senior High School.

For more information concerning the subject of this paper,

WRITE:

Clifford N. Allen
Parkrose Senior High School
Portland, Oregon

READ:

The textbooks for the course are:

Landis, Judson L. and Mary G. Landis. Personal Adjustment, Marriage, and Family Living. 5th edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970.

Landis, Paul H. Your Marriage and Family Living. 3rd edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969.

Other supplemental readings are included in the course bibliography, which may be obtained along with the course outline, by sending a 16¢ stamped, self-addressed envelope to:

F. C. Brown Foundation
1802 Moss Street
Eugene, Oregon 97403

Ask for "Parkrose Contemporary Family Life Outline."

ERIC DOCUMENTS

ED 074 355 - Functional Education for Family Planning, II. Program Design. 130 pp. MF - $.65, HC - $6.58. This document outlines a program for family life education.

ED 073 066 - Prior Teaching Experience as a Criterion in the Selection of Family Life Teachers: An Asset or a Liability? 13 pp. MF - $.65, HC - $3.29. The findings of this research study reinforce the belief that specialized training of family life teachers is important for the future of family life education.

ED 071 001 - The High School Student: A Personality Profile. 15 pp. MF - $.65, HC - $3.29. Teachers wishing to develop a high school course in family life education will want to do so with the needs and attitudes of their students clearly in mind. This paper presents a survey of life experiences of teenagers including their perceptions of parents, intra-family communications, family interaction, habits, and attitudes toward school, education, and the "Establishment."

ED 069 996 - Marriage Day by Day. Home and Family Education. 38 pp. MF - $.65, HC - $3.29. This is the description of a course designed to enable students to develop realistic expectations of marriage commitments in terms of personal values and goals.

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